

PREFACE

IN RECENT YEARS the topic of boundary issues—both simple and complex—has become a staple in conversations among human service professionals. Boundary issues range from egregious cases of sexual misconduct to much more subtle and nuanced questions related to, for example, practitioner self-disclosure to clients and boundary management in small and rural communities.

Boundary issues occur when professionals—including social workers, psychologists, mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, addictions specialists, pastoral counselors, psychiatrists, and psychiatric nurses—enter into more than one relationship with clients (and, in some instances, colleagues), whether professional, social, or business. Not until the 1990s did a critical mass of literature on the subject begin to emerge, although the broader field of professional ethics emerged as a bona fide specialty in the 1970s. This is a significant development in the evolution of the professional ethics field. Exploration of boundary issues also is the most recent development in my own evolving concern with professional ethics.

I first explored issues of professional ethics in the mid-1970s, at about the time the broader field of professional ethics (also known as applied and practical ethics) was just emerging. My inquiry started when I began to appreciate the complex ways in which human service professionals—including clinicians, administrators, managers, community advocates, policy makers, and researchers—encounter daunting ethical dilemmas that require difficult decisions. At the time I did not fully grasp how my nascent interest in this subject reflected a much larger phenomenon: the emergence of a new, discrete academic field focused on professional ethics. With the benefit that only hindsight can provide, I now understand how significant that

period was. What began as a fledgling interest among a relatively small coterie of scholars and practitioners has evolved into an intellectually rich, widely respected field with its own conceptual frameworks, body of knowledge, vocabulary, and academic imprimatur. Professional ethics truly has come of age and is now embedded deeply in professional education and discourse.

At the same time my own understanding of ethical issues has evolved, leading to my current interest in boundary issues—particularly those in which human service professionals become involved in “dual relationships” with clients and, at times, colleagues. Up through the late 1980s my work in the professional ethics arena focused mainly on the nature of diverse ethical dilemmas encountered by practitioners, ethical decision-making models, and the practical implications of ethical theory. During this period my colleagues and I paid relatively little attention to complex boundary issues; the general subject hardly was a major focus of attention.

By the early 1990s my own interests had broadened to include issues pertaining to what I now call ethics risk management, including concepts and strategies that human service professionals can use to protect clients’ rights, first and foremost, and prevent ethical complaints and lawsuits that allege ethics-related negligence or malpractice committed by professionals. This interest stemmed in part from my expanding service as an ethics consultant and expert witness (to use the court’s term) in a large number of lawsuits and licensing board cases around the United States involving human service professionals. Also, my emerging interest in risk-management issues has been influenced by my position as chair of a statewide committee responsible for managing ethics complaints filed against social workers. Further, a significant portion of the court cases and ethics complaints in which I have been involved as a consultant or expert witness have concerned the kinds of boundary issues that I examine in this book. In addition, my experience as chair of the national committee that wrote the current *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers deepened my understanding of the complicated challenges involved in cultivating ethical standards and providing sound guidance pertaining to boundary issues.

What I have learned over the years is that, without question, boundary and dual relationship issues are among the most challenging ethical dilemmas in the human services. Some dual relationships, such as sexual relationships with clients, need to be prevented. Other dual relationships are inevitable and need to be managed carefully—for example, when professionals who work and live in a rural area or on a military base encounter clients outside the clinical office.

Human service professionals have struggled with some boundary issues ever since the field was created, for example, managing social interactions with former clients, self-disclosures to clients, and responding to clients' gifts. However, other boundary issues are of much more recent origin—such as practitioners' use of social media sites and other Internet services in their relationships with clients—and could not possibly have been imagined by earlier generations of practitioners. Our collective understanding of these issues—the diverse forms they take, their consequences, and implications—has matured greatly in recent years. This book represents my effort to organize and reflect on these complex issues and to suggest how human service professionals who face them can best protect clients and themselves.

This book contains considerable case material. In most instances I disguise case-related details to protect the privacy of the parties involved. Some cases are a matter of public record.

BOUNDARY ISSUES AND DUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE HUMAN SERVICES

